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THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, 1962: THE 40th ANNIVERSARY



Annals of Blinksmanship

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by Thomas Blanton

Now that the Cold War is over, its history has become a growth industry, though in truth there was no great shortage of historical analysis even while the war was going on. Today, however, one finds a certain generational divide as perhaps the salient characteristic of the enterprise. Mostly younger scholars clustered around the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center—including James Hershberg, Vladislav Zubok, Chen Jian, Kathryn Weathersby, Mark Kramer, Csaba Bekes, and Hope Harrison—have pioneered the integration of sources from the "other side" of the Cold War into a nuanced, contextual, and truly international version of our recent past.

Acutely aware of the contingent nature of the new sources, these young historians avoid entanglement with any of the old, ideologically divided schools of Cold War history. To oversimplify drastically, the orthodox school of Herbert Feis and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., blamed the Cold War on the Soviet Union. The revisionist school of William Appleman Williams blamed American economic expansion for frightening the Soviets. The "postrevisionists," typified by John Lewis Gaddis, attempted an empirically based amalgam of the two sides, only to meet with criticism from revisionists who called this approach "orthodoxy plus archives." The postrevisionist retort was to dub the three schools "hawks," "doves," and "owls."

A few senior scholars already established in these debates have also dared to grapple with the new evidence—none to greater effect than the leading owl himself. Gaddis, a historian at Ohio University now moving east to Yale, has produced a fascinating, provocative, and in no small measure endearing revision of Cold War history up through the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The work is endearing because, in exposing the errors of past histories, Gaddis focuses frequently on his own. The careful reader of footnotes may judge this book to be the foundation of a new school of Cold War history: autorevisionism.

Hardly anyone in either the older or younger generation of Cold War scholars will agree with all of Gaddis's judgments. For example, is it truly explanatory to call Josef Stalin a "brutal romantic" when all Soviet leaders were brutal and Nikita Khrushchev retired the romance trophy? The book's grand sweep is beyond the reach of this review, but its penultimate chapter on the Cuban Missile Crisis may provide a lens through which to glimpse the extraordinary work that is going on in this field—especially when considered in tandem with a remarkable new history of the crisis based on Soviet sources.

The most enduring phrase summing up the Cuban Missile Crisis—the climax of the Cold War and the closest the world ever came to nuclear Armageddon—belongs to Secretary of State Dean Rusk: "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked." Thus was born the myth of calibrated brinkmanship—the belief that if you stand tough you win, and that nuclear superiority makes the difference in moments of crisis. This myth, midwived by the Kennedy family and its hagiographers, had untold consequences for the planning of the Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race.

A different story began to emerge in 1969, when *Thirteen Days*, the posthumous memoir of Robert F. Kennedy, revealed that the resolution of the crisis (Khrushchev's withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba) came after a series of secret meetings in which RFK offered the Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin not threats of nuclear retaliation but an old-fashioned diplomatic deal: a pledge of no U.S. invasion of Cuba, plus the withdrawal of U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey. The terms, according to the memoir, were that this could not be an explicit quid pro quo and that the deal would never be publicly acknowledged by the United States. Further revisions of the myth emerged in the early 1980s, when former Kennedy aides Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, alarmed by what they saw as President Ronald Reagan's embrace of brinkmanship, warned the public that the Cuban Missile Crisis had

not been resolved by America's nuclear superiority but by its conventional superiority in the Caribbean, which enabled restraint and the quarantine of Cuba.

Next came a trickle of declassified U.S. government documents in the mid-1980s, including notes and transcripts from the meetings of John F. Kennedy's top advisers, in which the president appears not as the fastest draw at the OK Corral but as a peacenik. As soon as the Joint Chiefs of Staff admitted that they could not guarantee the destruction through air strikes of all the Soviet missiles in Cuba, JFK decided to do whatever he could to avoid an invasion of Cuba and a war over what he called "some obsolete missiles in Turkey." In 1987 Rusk himself revealed JFK's willingness, had the crisis persisted much longer, to propose a public Turkey-Cuba trade through the United Nations—a willingness, in short, to blink.

Since then, the revisions have mounted as the documents have flooded out. Theodore Sorensen has admitted that while editing *Thirteen Days* he cut references in RFK's diary to an explicit Turkey-Cuba deal. Despite JFK's dismissal to reporters of any such deal as a weak-willed option floated by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson, we now know, on the basis of a declassified cable from Dobrynin (published in the Cold War International History Project Bulletin), that RFK made the deal explicit even as he handed back the formal Soviet letter recording it. His comment to Dobrynin was that such a document "could cause irreparable harm to my political career in the future."

Many of these revelations first saw the light of day at a series of conferences organized by James Blight and Janet [sic] Lang of the Thomas J. Watson, Jr., Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Held between 1987 and 1992, these "critical oral history" sessions included Kennedy aides, Soviet participants, and finally Cuban veterans (among them Fidel Castro), and they produced more revelations: that along with intermediate-range missiles, the Soviet arsenal in Cuba included tactical nuclear warheads that might have been used if the United States had invaded; and that Cuba was very much an actor in its own right. Castro at one point telling an increasingly alarmed Khrushchev to "use 'em or lose 'em."

On the Soviet side, the Blight-Lang sessions were forced to rely on the largely uncorroborated memories of aging veterans and their children (such as Khrushchev's son) rather than on solid documentation. As recently as September 1994, when I presented the Russian archives with a set of Kennedy audiotapes and a 15,000-page microfiche of declassified U.S. documents related to

the missile crisis, the archives had released only 700 pages on the subject. One may therefore imagine the jubilation among Cold War historians at the appearance of "One Hell of a Gamble," by the Russian scholar Alexandr A. Fursenko and his Canadian collaborator, Yale University historian Timothy Naftali.

It is a treasure-trove of a book, studded with quotations and citations from still-secret archives in Moscow, woven together with the new U.S. documentation. It is also a dramatic and highly readable narrative, the most authoritative to date, of the six-year period from the Cuban Revolution through the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination and the October 1964 coup that ousted Khrushchev. The title comes from a recently declassified Oval Office audiotape in which JFK told a belligerent congressional delegation that invading Cuba during the crisis would be "one hell of a gamble." To his everlasting credit, JFK was not willing to roll those dice.

The new Soviet evidence falls into three categories: Soviet intelligence and embassy reporting from Havana to Moscow, a similar flow from Soviet agents and officials in Washington, and internal Politburo and Khrushchev office records. The first category alone makes this book essential reading for any serious analyst of U.S.-Cuban relations. It yields extraordinary insights into the personalities of Castro, his brother Raúl, Che Guevara, and other leaders, as well as abundant information about Cuban military and intelligence capabilities. Perhaps most striking is evidence of the Cubans' unrelenting fear, before and after the Bay of Pigs landing in 1961, that a U.S. invasion was imminent. The authors' evocative rendering of the resulting paranoia suggests that when Khrushchev claimed that the missiles were there to defend the Cuban Revolution, he was not just scoring a propaganda point. (He also, as Gaddis points out, succeeded in this aim.)

Equally fascinating is the second category, Soviet reporting from Washington. For example, summaries of reports from a personable military intelligence officer named Georgi Bolshakov reveal that he hit it off with RFK and met with him on a backchannel basis some 51 times during 1961-62. There were also some woeful intelligence failures: the KGB station chief Alexandr Feklisov reported in March 1962 that he had at least three well-placed sources whose names "the Russian government continues to protect." Yet despite these alleged penetrations, during the October crisis the KGB fell back on (inaccurate) invasion tips from a bartender at the National Press Club.

The Holy Grail for Cold War historians is, of course, the third category of evidence: notes of Politburo meetings, Khrushchev

memos, and reports intended for the highest levels of the Kremlin. As cited by Fursenko and Naftali, this evidence adds rich new detail to our understanding of Khrushchev. Perhaps most astonishing is the degree to which the Soviet premier acted as his own intelligence analyst. So closed was Khrushchev's inner circle that he rarely consulted with the KGB about decisions regarding the United States. Instead, he would summon whatever prominent Americans happened to be in Moscow. On the occasion of his deliberations over whether to place tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba, the visitor dropping into Khrushchev's dacha for a chat was the poet Robert Frost!

As with all such exclusive scholarly arrangements, the strength of Fursenko and Naftali's book is also its weakness. Very few of the KGB, Politburo, and military intelligence (GRU) documents cited here are available to other scholars. Moreover, the authors' acknowledgments and source notes give little indication of what sorts of conditions were attached to their exclusive access—a discouraging omission, indeed. Some citations are reassuringly precise, while others read simply "spravka (summary), GRU." What were those conditions? Did the authors select the materials they wanted from complete lists and finding aids, or were their searches directed by the staffs of these still-closed archives? That said, if the authors had not pushed for whatever access they obtained, our understanding of the Cold War would be demonstrably the poorer. As Gaddis does through his assessment, Fursenko and Naftali through their narrative arrive at a new definition of heroism on the part of national leaders—what Gaddis calls "a new profile in courage." We now know that the Cuban Missile Crisis arose from a certain degree of adventurism on both sides—Kennedy's covert actions against Castro and Khrushchev's secret missile deployment—and that it was resolved only because both men were willing to risk humiliation rather than Armageddon.

In one of the great counterfactuals of history, we might ask, What if Khrushchev had only held out another day or two for a public Turkey-Cuba trade? Without the "Russians blinked" version of history, might the American officials who planned the Vietnam War have had less faith in their calibrated brinkmanship? Might Khrushchev have survived the October 1964 coup plot, in which his adventurism in Cuba was one of the indictments? President Kennedy later estimated the odds of nuclear war during the missile crisis as having been one in three. Bundy guessed lower, at one in 100. But as Bundy added, "In this apocalyptic matter the risk can be very small indeed and still much too large for comfort."

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